

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,
by Pastor David Fischler, on Sunday, July 22, 2012**

DO NOT FORGET THIS!

Psalm 103:1-22

Douglas Horton was a congregational clergyman whose career spanned roughly the 30s through the 60s. He was one of the architects of the merger between three of the denominations in the 1950s that resulted in the United Church of Christ. He said something that I've heard since I was young but had no idea until I went looking for it that he was the source. He wrote once, "We may not always get what we want, but surely we will get what we deserve." I'm not sure, but I think that later became a Rolling Stones' song. And it's utter nonsense. Thank God it is.

This week I had an illustration of what's wrong with what Rev. Horton said. I'm going to tell you this, despite the fact that it's embarrassing, but I'm going to tell you because I want to deprive my wife of the pleasure of doing so. On Thursday I was getting ready to head out to an appointment and then up here to Family Night. I got in the car, got my stuff arranged, made a notation in my mileage book, and put the car in gear. Less than a second later I realized I had forgotten to put the garage door up. Fortunately, I'm not one of those people who just jams it right out of the garage. I probably hit it at less than 5 miles per hour, the result being that I merely destroyed the door at a cost of what will be about \$600, and put a dent in the car, which we've only had for two months. As soon as the impact registered with my brain I retreated to the place where I'm five years old and I dropped the glass and broke it and thought, "Mama's gonna whip my butt good." Only my mother is dead, so somebody else was going to have to do it. You can guess who. I jumped out of the car and saw the damage that was done. Marianne came running out into the garage and looked at it and immediately went into action the way she does. Our garage door had four glass windows in it. It now has two. She immediately went to sweeping up the glass and we put up the door to see if it would still work with the garage door opener. It did, amazingly enough. The car is still perfectly drivable.

So the next day we went to Lowe's and arranged for a new garage door, which will happen in a couple of weeks. We called the insurance company and said, "Guess what?" And they said, "You want us to pay for what?" But they will. The next day when we were in Lowe's, we'd done everything we needed to do – found out how much it was going to be, which was about twice what Mama said it should cost, or at least what she thought it would cost. I said, "I want to do something about this." I want to put here in parentheses that I have a certain amount of money that I've accumulated over the years. It's not all that much, but it's from stuff like weddings and funerals, the kind of stuff I haven't had to do here. So it's been around for a long time waiting to be used on hobbies, that sort of thing. I said I had to pay *at least* for the amount over and above what Marianne thought the garage door was going to cost out of my hobby money. She said, "No you don't need to do that." I said, "But I need to take responsibility here." She said, "That's okay, you've already taken responsibility. That's all you need to do." At

that moment, though I had not come across the name of Douglas Horton, I discovered how little he knows about real life and how unhappy his marriage must have been.

We don't get what we deserve in this life. If we got what we deserve, quite frankly, we'd be a lot more unhappy than we are. And if we got what we deserve for eternity, we'd be unhappy for as long as that is. The 103rd Psalm brings that home, because it talks about God whose mercy, whose love and whose grace even manages to put my wife's to shame, as marvelous as that is, because His knows no bounds and His really is for all eternity.

So I'd like for us to take a look today at Psalm 103, which, by the way, I might add, I had chosen for the text for this week before I got in the car on Thursday. This psalm begins with praise. We're told at the beginning, "Praise the Lord, O my soul; all my inmost being praise His holy name." Our relationship with God is to be one of praise. The Hebrew word that is used here for praise, sometimes translated "bless," and in some of our translations of the Old Testament, that's the way it's put, "Bless the Lord, O my soul," that word *barakh* means "to express appreciation, gratitude, respect, a joint relationship of goodwill towards the one who is being praised." Appreciation. Gratitude. Respect. Goodwill. The praise we're to offer to the Lord is not simply praise with our lips. I can read, "Praise the Lord, O my soul; all my inmost being praise His holy name." Praise the Lord, O my soul even though I think He's given me a rotten deal in life. I don't really mean it. It's possible to say those words and have them no more express what is actually in your heart than if you were to praise a child for scratching your car. It's possible to praise God just with the lips. And what the psalmist calls us to do here is to offer the praise of people who genuinely love God. The praise that is the kind of thing that passes between parents and children, or between husbands and wives.

I've heard some folks ask the question, "Why do we need to praise God? What does He need with our praise? Does it make God any bigger, any better, any more important? Does it make Him feel good?" Well, I don't know about any of that, but I do know that when Marianne extended that mercy to me on Thursday, if we hadn't been right there in the middle of the warehouse at Lowe's, I would have just grabbed her and given her the biggest smooch I could possibly lay on her. And it wasn't just because of what she'd just done. It was because of who she was. That act embodied who she is. At that moment, as at every other moment, I just feel like I am the most blessed person on the face of the earth to be married to her. And I feel like I am the most blessed person on the face of the earth to be able to call the God of the universe Father. And to know that He looks on me, not as a slave or a servant, but as a son. And He looks on all of you as sons and daughters of His. What can that provoke in us but praise?

That note of praise not only starts this psalm but ends it as well. The ending, interestingly enough, is corporate, rather than individual. At the beginning it is "Praise the Lord, O *my* soul." In verses 20-22 it's, "Praise the Lord, you His angels, Praise the Lord all His heavenly hosts, ... Praise the Lord, all His works everywhere in His dominion." So when we praise God we join with all of the people of God. We join with all that He has created. We join with the heavenly host in expressing appreciation,

gratitude, respect, a joint relationship and goodwill. That is why we praise, or that is what we do when we praise.

Now as to why, the psalmist goes on in verses 3-5 to let us know that that praise, at least in part, is based on His works. "... and forget not all His benefits – who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's." It's amazing what He does. He forgives our sins. That's one of those commonplace things that Christians say all the time and I wonder if we really grasp just how enormous what we're saying is? When we sin against one another, we violate a standard of justice. When we sin against God, we not only violate an absolute standard of justice, but we sin against the One who has made us, the One who holds our lives in His hand, the One who could, if He chose to, blot us out in an instant, and the One who has given everything He had for us. When we say, with the psalmist, "Forget not all His benefits who forgives all your sins," we're not just saying that He said, "Oh, don't worry about it, no big deal." In the same way that Marianne didn't say, "Oh, no big deal," anybody could've done that. She said, "You've taken responsibility." And He said, "You've taken responsibility, but you're not going to pay the penalty because you can't pay the penalty, because the penalty for our sin is everlasting death, and that is not the plan the Father has chosen for His children. So instead, He gives His Son and His Son pays that penalty. It's a lot more than \$300. And that's for all of eternity and His Son has paid that. Shall we praise God?"

He forgives all your sins. He heals all your diseases. That doesn't mean that the children of God go through life without ever being ill, without ever being injured, without ever being in any kind of physical pain. It means that He enables us to cope with that and again, yes, He does heal all of our diseases, for the eternity that He has for us. That eternity is coming up later in the psalm. The eternity that He has for us is one without pain, without disease. He tells us that in Revelation. He redeems your life from the pit and that pit is sometimes taken to refer to hell, it sometimes is thought to refer to the grave but in any case He redeems you from the worst possible thing that could happen to you. He buys you back. He crowns us with love and compassion. That's another way of saying He anoints us, He puts His mark on us, and He does so with His gifts of love and compassion. He enables us to enjoy life. He satisfies your desires with things and, yes, in the broken state of the world sometimes those things don't come our way. The fact is that it is not His desire that all of life be nothing but suffering and for the person who knows His love and the love of any other single person, they know what it is to have their desires satisfied by good things. He renews our youth, which is to say that He restores us to His favor. So His praise is based on His works on our behalf and His works then are based on His nature. This is verses 6-12. The key verse in this passage within Psalm 103 is undoubtedly verse 8, "The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love." Interesting terms that are used there.

The first one is compassion. The word is *rachum*. *Rachum* refers to the pity and devotion of a parent to a helpless child. That would be you and me. We are the helpless children. We are the ones who cannot find a way out of the mess that we have made of

this world and of our lives. And His compassion is towards us and He reaches down and He lifts us up out of that mess that we've made. He's gracious. That means that He gives us what we do nothing to deserve. I heard someone, it might have been Chuck Swindoll, define grace and mercy. The way he did that is this. He said, "Grace is God giving you what you do not deserve. Mercy is God not giving you what you do deserve." So both of those are part of this verse. He gives us what we do not deserve. He gives us His love. He gives us His forgiveness. He gives us His Son. He gives us His Holy Spirit. He gives us one another. I don't deserve you. I've done nothing to deserve the relationships that have built up within this congregation over the last six years here and at the Cove. I don't deserve that. I haven't done anything to deserve that. That's something that He has built up, something that He has given. He's slow to anger, which means that He is patient with us even in our sinfulness. Can we try the Lord's patience? What do you think? Yes, we can try His patience. And it does not say He's never angry with us. That's one of the distinguishing marks of liberal forms of Christianity that I think are so unfortunate. God is just drained of any aspect of anger or wrath. The fact of the matter is that I would hope that God would get angry with me. Because there are times when I do stuff that tries His patience. I would hope that He would take seriously His truth, His righteousness and His absolute standard of right and wrong enough to say, "You know, there are times when you just make me crazy!" I think that's the sign of a loving parent.

A loving parent sometimes gets mad. I don't mean by that that a loving parent loses his temper and takes it out on their child. A loving parent makes clear to a child that is about to put his hand on a hot stove that the fate of his hand matters. The fate of his hand makes a difference. You don't want to see them hurt. And it makes you angry when they do what they were told not to do and they do it deliberately, they do it unthinkingly and yes, it provokes you. But the Lord is slow to anger, which means He recognizes that we are still simple people. We're going to mess up. We do that on a daily basis and so He strives with us over that. He is abounding in love, *hesed*. It's a love that's loyal. *Agape* and *hesed* are not exactly the same thing. *Agape* is the Greek equivalent of that. *Hesed* is a word that cannot really be translated into English. In fact if you look at different translations you'll see that word is most commonly *mercy* because there isn't exactly an English equivalent. Probably the best way to put it is a love that is loyal. A love that, in the words of an old hymn, "will not let us go."

Some folks wonder why it is that Calvinists are so intent on pushing the idea that we have security, eternal security in Christ. Everyone knows that the fifth element of the Tulip (and you all can recite the Tulip by heart, right? You all know the Calvinist Tulip? There will be a test afterwards.) stands for *perseverance* of the saints, and that is to say that when God takes hold of us He will not let us go. It's as simple as that and that's what Psalm 103 is telling us. We can try His patience to the nth degree. We can ignore His law. We can ignore Him. And He will not let us go. He will strive with us regardless. If we are His, we are always His. In the same way you who have children know that your children can do terrible things, your children can go to jail, your children can just do the most awful things that you can think of and they will still be your child. You won't like what they did, but you will love them nonetheless.

It broke my heart to hear the response the media had from the Holmes family this week. Did you hear that? The Holmes family, the parents of Jim Holmes, the Colorado shooter? They didn't try to make excuses for him. They didn't give the line that some people will give in that situation, you know, "Well, he's a good boy but we don't know what went wrong." I don't think they do know what went wrong. But their first thought was for their hearts to go out to the victims. But they also didn't try to run away from it. They said, "This is our son and what he has done is horrible but he's still our son." One of the first things his father did was fly to Colorado to be with his son. Was it to pat him on the back or to wag a finger in his face? No, it was just to be with him. Even at our worst moments, the Lord will not let us go. Abounding, loyal love.

The rest of this part of the psalm, verses 6-12, illustrates these characteristics. We're told that He stands up for the oppressed, He doesn't harbor grudges or hold onto our sin. In verse 10 we're told that He doesn't give us the punishment that we deserve for our sin. He tells us in verse 12 that He removes our sin from us and He places it on His Son. A lot of scholars have noted similarities between Psalm 103 and passages in the second half of the book of Isaiah. Isaiah 53:6 is pertinent to this point, "The Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all." In Psalm 103 it's put this way, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us and He has placed them on His Son."

And why is that? Verses 13-18 make the point clear why that is. It's because we're His children and He is our Father. As a father who has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who are His. It's stunning to think of the Lord of the universe, the One who created everything as my Father and your Father. That's an amazing thing. And once again, it's language that we use all the time. If we pray the Lord's prayer, for instance, we start off with "Our Father." And I wonder how many times we think how amazing it is that we can call the Lord God of the universe Father. Those of you who have ever been to a seder will have heard the prayers that are prayed at a seder, and typically, the way He is addressed is as Lord God, King of the universe. And He is King. He rules over all. But it's stunning to think that the one who is King is also Father. You know what that makes you, don't you? It makes you princes and princesses. It makes you members of the royal court, one that is far better than, say, the British royal court. You couldn't give me Prince Charles's job for love nor money. I do not want to be in his shoes. But being a child of the King of the universe, that's a good deal.

So we're talking here about a Father, a Father who knows what we're made of (verses 14-15). He knows how we were formed. He remembers that we're dust. As for man, his days are like grass. He flourishes like a flower of the field, a wind blows over it and it is gone, and is remembered no more. Here today, gone tomorrow, in the flick of an eye. And you think, "No, my life has been going on forever. I'm really old. I can remember stuff that happened before America was born. I remember stuff from before Jesus. I am older than dirt." And God says, "No, no. You're not older than dirt. You *are* dirt." That's what you were born out of and to that you will return. And that of necessity makes us weak.

I have read recently that someone said that the entirety of human existence is shadowed by the fact that we will die. Doesn't matter what you talk about – family, job, politics, economics, religion, any aspect of human existence, both individual and corporate, lives in the shadow of death. You'll remember that Adam Smith knew that. Adam Smith, the theoretical founder of capitalism, knew that when he wrote, "In the long run, we're all dead." I'm not sure exactly what that was supposed to justify. Shortsighted planning? I hope not. Whatever it was, it was true. In the long run we are all dead. And God knows that. And He knows what that does to us. He knows the ways that that can distort and the ways that that can mess up a life. And yet, even with that, he says in verse 17, from everlasting to everlasting the Lord's love is with those who fear Him and His righteousness with the children's children. That's the difference between Him and us. We may go through life afraid of death. But He knows that that isn't the end. He knows compassion from everlasting to everlasting really means something. And it's not just for Him. It's for us as well.

His love for His people does not know any bounds of time or space. You can talk about relativity all you want, but to God eternity is eternity. It is forever and all those who look to Him as Father and remain in His covenant are going to be with Him, are going to be and already are recipients of all His benefits. And the reason for that is that He remembers us and calls upon us to remember Him. There is nowhere that we can hide from Him. There is nowhere that we can go that He will forget us. There is no place so low, there is no situation so horrendous that He is not in it. I had the urge on Friday to rush out to Colorado and tell the people not to listen to the psychiatrist. This isn't about emotion. This is about reality. And the reality is that God is with His children even in the most horrible of circumstances. Even if they don't feel it, He is still there and if He is still there, the least that we can say is, "Praise the Lord, and forget not all His benefits."